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The Fandango of Harriet and Annie in Sayers' *Gaudy Night*

by Mary Lynne Gasaway Hill,

The story of Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* originates from the eruption of chaos within the traditional patriarchal structures of academia. This text is composed of a series of misinterpretations or misreadings concerning this chaos. These misreadings occur due to the permeation of discourse by the Symbolic Order or the "order of language and culture" (Belsey 248). The language of this order turns on the assumption of binary opposition such as culture/ nature, light/ dark, Logos/ Eros. Within Sayers' novel, Lord Peter Wimsey, the ineffable detective who saved Miss Harriet Vane from the gallows, symbolizes the Logos. Annie Wilson, the revenge-seeking widow and Trickster-figure of the story, represents Wimsey's counterpart, the Eros. The play of the binary opposition of the Logos and Eros prompts a woman, Harriet Vane, functioning within the patriarchy, choose between them. Harriet, dominated by the Logos but questioning its supremacy, contemplates this choice throughout the play of the novel. The forcing of this choice, a choice of metonymy, distorts the vision of Harriet, the protagonist, and of Annie, the antagonist, revealing each as defined by a type of lack within their lives. In their attempts to satisfy their desires rooted in their lack, Harriet and Annie engage in a sort of literary Fandango.¹ Each experiences the passions the other invokes within her. They do not physically touch one another until the Law of the Father is breached, in the final sign, of one of the possible sub-texts of the novel. The signs that compose this sub-text serve as the music by which Harriet and Annie perform their dance.

Within Sayers' text, Annie as Trickster, taking on the roles of a ghostly poison-pen and poltergeist, fragments the structure of a fictional Oxford College named Shrewsbury. As Trickster, Annie, a scout at the College, conducts this fragmentation through the composition of a text of her own. Annie takes the "marginalized discourse found in madness, the irrational, the maternal, and the sexual" and releases their "revolutionary power" (Tong 230). She writes her text as a series of signs that range from sinister written messages to violent attacks. She combines the written word with performance art in a rhythmic semiotic challenge to the Symbolic Order. Unable to discern authorship of this challenge, the Scholars of Shrewsbury request the assistance of Harriet, a former student.

However, Harriet, who is a writer of detective fiction not a professional detective, is also unable to determine the identity of the Trickster. One of the reasons that both the dons and Harriet fail to decode the text of the absent/ present author is due to the patriarchal mediation of their vision. As subjects within and of the patriarchy, Harriet and the dons interpret the signs of the Trickster, employing the theories of female sexuality (ala Freud) available to them in 1935 British academia. Due to the perceived anti-female – as opposed to anti-female scholar – theme of the Poison Pen's messages, the Shrewsburian scholars along with Harriet, assume that the Poison-Pen is a celibate, sex-starved woman with a "morbid desire to attract attention and create a public uproar" (Sayers 100).

Harriet and the dons possess such a stringent idea of what is real, that they fail to comprehend that they cast the Poltergeist into the role of a stock female character, on the phallogocentric stage. The “detectives” fall victim to the “phallogocentric drive to stabilize, organize and rationalize” their “conceptual universe” (Tong 223). As a result they have transformed the object of the culprit into the object of their desire. Therefore, the ghostly author, as subject, along with the work itself, have only one side to them – the reverse. Harriet is only able to read the reverse of Annie’s text because of difference or the “inevitable, meaning-creative gap between the object of perception and [her] perceptions of it” (Tong 223).

The ghost, ergo, is not what she is perceived to be. Annie Wilson, whose original name is Charlotte Ann Clark, is a woman who was happily married, with one child and another on the way, when her husband, Arthur Robinson, committed an error in judgment. Arthur, who attains a Master of Arts degree (M.A.) in History, steals evidence in the form of a letter that repudiates his thesis. While applying for a teaching position at Flamborough College, Mr. Robinson encounters Miss de Vine, who later becomes the Research Fellow at Shrewsbury. Miss de Vine, possessing a knowledge of Robinson’s thesis topic and of the existence of the contradicting evidence, exposes Mr. Robinson’s deception. He is promptly stripped of his M.A., begins drinking heavily, and eventually ends his own life. Annie, as zealously devoted wife, seeks revenge upon Miss de Vine for the “murder” of her husband. Annie interprets the actions of Miss de Vine as those of a woman engaged in an improper activity for a woman/ her gender. Annie believes that death results from Miss de Vine’s participation in what is an unthinkable activity for a woman. Miss de Vine, on the other hand, sincerely believes that her actions are mandated by the quest for Truth in scholarship.

Annie, unable to comprehend Miss de Vine’s motives, chooses to avenge her husband’s fall from grace and subsequent death. On the whole, her revenge consists of a collection of at least twenty signs to which Miss de Vine, the other dons, Harriet, and eventually Lord Peter Wimsey respond. Through the composition and publication of each sign of this sub-text, Harriet experiences the intensification of internal and external pressures. Externally, the Senior Common Room pressures Harriet to prove the truth and validity of their hypothesis. Internally, Harriet is haunted not only by the signs, which symbolize for her the consequences of the divorce of intellect and heart, but their absent/ present author as well. Harriet, as a self, recognizes her lack in the reflection, via the text of the Other, of the ghost.

By virtue of this recognition, Harriet allows the Poltergeist to lead her throughout the first nineteen turns of their dance. In the leading, Trickster gains power. However, it is not necessarily gained by what Annie actually does; but by what the Senior Common Room, including Harriet, thinks she is capable of doing. Annie, in her marginalized position as scout and further fragmentation as ghost, possesses the potential for freedoms unavailable to the scholars. She does not have to answer to the authority claiming voice of the Father. According to Kristeva, power is situated in such marginalization. “In social, sexual, and symbolic experiences, being a woman” (in this case a woman as unidentifiable ‘ghost’) “has always provided a means to another end, to becoming something else: a subject-in-

the-making, a subject on trial” (in Jones 363). Ironically, Annie, as one of the subjects-in-making in the primary text, is attempting to uphold the authority-claiming Law of the Father through her semiotic discourse. However, Harriet, her counterpart, personifies the woman on trial. As she twirls in response to the rhythm of the signs, Harriet reveals her trial of the tensions inherent in her quest for *jouissance*, which require a compromise between Eros and Logos.

Annie’s text forces Harriet to strive for her *jouissance* by exploring the relationship between Eros and Logos. Because of the semiotic presentation, Harriet, as well as other members of the academic community of Shrewsbury, is forced into an alien symbolic chain of meaning. In this foreign realm, the sub-text, as meta-signifier, takes on an existence, in the Imaginary, as that of the source of absolute control. Annie as Trickster utilizes this supposed existence as her weapon, by which she plays on the “intersubjective relations which expropriate the individual” (Lacan 311). Suspicion then saturates the relations of the Senior Common Room. Harriet demonstrates this through her continual misjudgment of Miss Hillyard’s actions and words.

The Poltergeist wields her weapon against the words of the female scholars. In signs number five, seven, and thirteen, the Poison-Pen attacks prose works which express a point of view, a position of difference, from phallogocentric discourse. In sign number five, the ghost destroys certain sections of Miss Lydgate’s text. The sections destroyed are those in which Lydgate questions conclusions, drawn by male scholars, in regard to English prosody. In sign number seven, the ghost does not limit her attack on Miss Barton’s book (*A Woman’s Place in the Modern State*) merely to a section but burns the entire work. In this text, Barton questions the relationship to *Kinder*, *Kirche*, and *Kuche*. In the thirteenth sign, the Poison-Pen destroys the leisure reading, *The Search* by C.P. Snow, of an undergraduate. This text reflects the story of Arthur Robinson in that it involves a scholar, who fails to gain a post, due to an error in his thesis. However, unlike Miss de Vine, Snow’s scholar does NOT expose another man’s error. He chooses not to expose the false scholar because the man, his wife and family, needs to retain his position. Snow’s text ends on that note, leaving the reader undecided as to whether Snow approves or disapproves, of his character’s choices. The Shrewesburian ghost interprets Snow’s choice as that of disapproval. Thus, she burns the book. However, the Dean, Miss Martin, reads the text in the opposite manner, believing that Snow approves of the “wife and children first” choice.

The misreading of sign number nine diverts Harriet’s attention from the scouts as a group. This chapter of the ghost’s text consists of an academic figure hung in effigy. A butter knife is jabbed into the stomach of the figure, pinning a quotation about the Harpies from the *Aeneid* to it. Harriet determines that a working knowledge of Latin is required for the usage of the Virgilian quote. The scouts do not possess such knowledge, only the scholars do. As a result, Miss Vane fails to discern the imitative aspect of this act. Through this sign, Sayers offers an example of Annie’s misinterpretations as well. Does Annie understand the passage, or does she pin it there because it is the main part of her husband’s suicide note? If she possesses an understanding of it, then Annie equates female scholars with the Harpies, as devourers of men. If, however, Annie does not have

such an understanding, is it merely a signifier, devoid of meaning, until Harriet loads it with such? Certainly, Trickster – apart from Annie – is at play at this moment in the tale. Another puzzle related to this sign is the consideration of who physically wrote the Harpy quotation. Does Annie copy the passage from her husband's suicide note, leaving a ghostly trace of her handwriting? Or, is this the actual physical Harpy passage of Arthur Robinson's suicide note? Sayers does not offer her readers an answer that allows for open interpretation of this manifestation.

After this manifestation, the dons, Harriet, and Peter, whose assistance Harriet seeks, assume that the subsequent signs of the ghostly text are to follow a linear progression, growing more violent with each passing one. However, the movement of time of the Poltergeist is not that of the scholar. The ghost works in a circular, rhythmic time, the monumental time of the semiotic, not the linear or sequential time associated with the masculine. As a result, her acts appear to the scholars to be emerging as consistently more inconsistent. She shatters their thinkable pattern by utilizing the unrepressed semiotic, which has "room for whatever disgusts and/or horrifies" the academic group (Tong 231). The community of Shrewesbury therefore experiences a growing sense of displacement – of non-closure – within the very walls of their beloved college.

This sense of displacement is intensified when the ghost extinguishes the lights (sign number ten). When the lights go out, Harriet is re-creating Wilfrid, a troubling character in her latest detective novel. Harriet, working within the rational realm of the Logos, is unable to continue her creation in the dark. The dark signifies the realm of the unknown, of the unthinkable, of the Poison-Pen. The Poison-Pen, unlike her dance partner, Harriet, views the eclipsed walls of Shrewesbury as the fields of her Elysium, wreaking havoc as she runs through the Stygian blackness.

Shortly after surfacing from the darkness, Harriet listens to Peter's nephew, St. George, relate his own shadowy rendezvous with the Poltergeist. St. George encounters her while trying to scale the wall of the Fellow's Garden as a prank. The ghost, who jumps from behind a bush and grabs his neck, threatens him. Through the verbalization of the threat, the reader learns that the ghost contends that scholarly women not only murder beautiful boys like St. George, but they also eat their hearts out. She also reveals a clue as to the identity of the original victim, Arthur, by telling her captive that the "other one had fair hair too" (Sayers 203). This leads to another of Harriet's misreadings in which she believes that the Poltergeist and the victim are the same person. She does not consider the possibility of revenge in the name of another.

Sign number eleven, the planting of the newspaper in Miss de Vine's room, is one of Annie's attempts to encourage Harriet's misinterpretations. Annie adds to this evidence against Miss de Vine by dropping hairpins, similar to those worn by the Research Fellow, during the Poltergeist's performance in the Science Lecture room (sign number 17). These actions, along with the notes and scribbles on the walls, reveal the less violent curve of the Poison-Pen's cycle.

The persecution of young Miss Newland resulting in her attempted suicide, however, reflects the dangerous and potentially fatal curve of the cycle. Newland, a student preparing for her examinations, represents an expansion of victim territory for the Poltergeist. No longer does the Poison-Pen just desire the destruction of Miss de Vine and the other female scholars, she wishes to destroy their protégées as well. Newland, a very disciplined and brilliant student, represents the perfect interpretant for the ghost. Although she is an excellent pupil, Newland's youthful rationality is no match for the unchecked passions of the Poltergeist.

Through this violent twist in the dance with the Poltergeist, Harriet acquires a degree of awareness concerning the object of the ghost's desire. It is not just the destruction of herself, Miss de Vine, or the other scholars, but the death of female scholarship in general. By the inclusion of the students in her victim domain, the ghost hopes to abort, from the womb of Shrewesbury, the birth of any new female scholars. These young scholars, in the eyes of Annie, must not be allowed to perpetuate the existing threat, already sanctioned by the institutionalization of Shrewesbury, to the Law of the Father.

Annie desperately hopes to align herself with this law, but Trickster does not allow this. She attempts such alignment by including the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford in her reading audience (sign number 16). She composes a text for the Vice-Chancellor informing him of the misbehavior at Shrewesbury. However, the Vice-Chancellor's vision is also mediated by patriarchal discourse. As a result, he interprets the note as an unauthored text, a symbol of uncontrolled Eros, which is therefore illegitimate in academic discourse. For the Vice-Chancellor at this point, the absent author is the threat, not Shrewesbury and its female scholars, to Oxford. As a result, the "University [proves] to be as solid as the College; having let the women in, it [is] not prepared to let them down" (Sayers 435).

Oxford permits the women to pursue Truth. The university offers a space to "fuse into a corporate unity with one another and with every man and woman to whom integrity of mind meant more than material gain" (Sayers 27). Peter contends that this choice dictates the University retain its loyalty to the College in the face of an internal or external threat. This is Peter's interpretation of the Symbolic Order's domination of female scholarship. However, throughout the text, the dons often mention that only as long as they pose no threat to the phallogocentric structure, they are permitted to "play with their little toys" (Sayers 51). Thus, in the eyes of the marginalized female scholars, the mere appearance of the irrational threatens their tentative acceptance in the Scholarly Garden of Eden.

Harriet assures immediate continuation of this acceptance by deferring Annie's intended physical attack on her (sign number 18). While Harriet is eating lunch with a friend in town, Annie stages a phone call from the Warden, requesting Harriet's immediate return to college. However, in an unprecedented step, Harriet doubts the validity of the call and double checks with the Warden's maid. Harriet realizes that she questions the call because the ghost uses the term "miss" instead of "madam," the term used by the Warden's maid when addressing her. The Poltergeist leaves a trace or clue to which Harriet responds with a new twist in their dance.

Having been thwarted by this new twist, the Poltergeist frees her hatred of Harriet and of Harriet-as-representation-of-all-female-scholars. The ghost invades Harriet's room and crushes the ivory chess set, a recent gift from Peter. Harriet's possession of this chess set signifies for Annie an inappropriate activity for a woman. A "womanly woman" (unlike Miss de Vine who defeats Harriet in ten straight games) does not play chess in Annie's world. On the other hand, Harriet views the chess set not as a symbol of the Logos but as its opposite – a symbol of passion – of Eros. Harriet develops a passion for the chess set and permits Peter to give it to her. When the Poison-Pen destroys it, Harriet, quickly executes the corresponding step in her and Annie's Fandango, the allowance of her anger to engulf the Logos.

This engulfment sets the stage for the final revolution in the dance of the Poltergeist. Annie physically attacks Harriet when she mistakes her for Miss de Vine. In this moment, Trickster tricks Annie-as-Trickster in this mistaking, as well as when she mistakes the chess set as a representation of Logos. However, when Annie mistakes Harriet for Miss de Vine, Annie's misinterpretation, on one level of interpretation, actually maintains narrative integrity as Harriet is her dance partner, not Miss de Vine. Through this assault, Annie defiles the Law of the Father, the Law of the Fandango, by making physical contact with her partner. Within the Law, the touch of the masculine Logos soils the feminine Eros. No longer is the Eros pure. No longer is it a valuable commodity on the masculine market. As the pair crashes to the floor in their struggles, Harriet hits her head, the center of the intellect, on the corner of the bookcase, a receptacle of the textual Logos. She bleeds profusely. According to the dons and Peter, it is probably the appearance of Harriet's blood that causes the ghost to flee, terminating the dance. Although Annie is a woman and a mother, her psyche is so saturated by the Symbolic Order, that blood to her is what Kristeva terms an "abject horror."

With the conclusion of the Fandango, Harriet faces her partner as Annie – not as the ghost – in the Senior Common Room. Annie exposes Harriet's fear of the metonymic choice, of intellect over heart, to Peter and the membership of the Senior Common Room.

You had a lover once, and he died. You chucked him out because you were too proud to marry him. You were his mistress and you sucked him dry, and you didn't value him enough to let him make an honest woman of you. He died because you weren't there to look after him. I suppose you'd say you loved him ... But you take men and use them and throw them away when you've finished with them ... What are you going to do with that one there? You send for him to do your dirty work, and when you've finished with him you'll get rid of him (Sayers 444).

This is Annie's final misreading, with Trickster on the loose, dancing freely between Annie and Harriet. Harriet, by having to dance with the ghost, finally accepts to a degree both parts, Eros and Logos, of herself. Through this acknowledgment, Harriet attains a sense of self-identity and is ready to accept Peter's repeated proposal of marriage. This agreement to marry tempts many readers to view Harriet's action as her attainment of complete self-identity. This is not quite accurate as a unified self, despite the desire for it,

is impossible due to the omnipresent tensions between the conscious and the unconscious. Nevertheless, Harriet does discover a 'value' for herself. As a result, she is equipped for her new partner, Peter, who prefers the appropriate music of the Symbolic Order, (such as Bach's Concerto in D Minor), but comprehends the unpredictable rhythm of the semiotic. Thus by virtue of her experiences with her partners – Peter as Logos and Annie as Eros (although, within Trickster's realm, they function periodically as their opposites in the narrative, too) – Harriet, at the close of the novel, possesses a knowledge of and an appreciation for the potential harmony of the intellect and the heart.

Appendix One

The Signs of the Ghost's Subtext in *Gaudy Night*

1. Cartoon
2. Malicious note
3. Malicious note
4. Burning of academic gowns
5. Destruction of Miss Lydgate's book
6. Scribbling and graffiti on the walls
7. Destruction of Miss Barton's book
8. Destruction in library
9. Figure hung in effigy
10. Lights go out
11. St. George encounters the ghost
12. Newspaper planted in Miss de Vine's room
13. Destruction of *The Search* by C.P. Snow (check this)
14. Haunting of Miss Newland
15. Warning note to Miss de Vine
16. Note to the Vice-Chancellor
17. Disturbance in the Science Lecture Room
18. Staging of the phone call
19. Shattering of the chess set
20. Attack on Harriet

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ⁱ A Fandango is a passionate Spanish dance in rhythm varying from slow to quick in three-quarter time. It is danced by a couple, but they do not touch each other during the course of the dance. They usually hold castanets or tambourines.